

Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORDS: Need Help Instituting EHRs? HHS Plans to Open 70 Regional Centers That Can Assist You

Plus: HHS officials discuss the term 'meaningful use.'

Need a jump start to institute your electronic health record (EHR) system? The government plans to give the program a shot in the arm by injecting \$1.2 billion in grants that will go toward helping healthcare providers implement EHRs.

The grants will go toward two areas, said **Kathleen Sebelius**, Health and Human Services (HHS) secretary, during an Aug. 20 conference call with members of the healthcare media.

The first goal includes \$598 million to fund about 70 regional centers. The centers will "support physicians and hospitals in the adoption and meaningful use of EHRs," noted **David Blumenthal, MD**, CMS's national coordinator for health information technology, during the call.

Two-thirds of the regional extension centers should be up and running in early 2010, Blumenthal said. HHS's second goal is to offer approximately \$564 million in support for state designated entities to promote health information exchange within their jurisdictions, Blumenthal said. "This will provide state resources and support to lead the effort to make it possible for information to travel around the healthcare system between EHRs, between systems of care, to be where the patient needs it and where the hospital needs it at any point in time."

Keep in mind: "This is just the first wave of resources invested in health technology, aimed at really transforming our paper-driven system to an electronic system over the next several years, providing help and support for hospitals and doctors as they make this conversion," Sebelius said.

'Meaningful Use' Questioned

During the Q&A portion of the call, several callers posed questions regarding when HHS would define the term "meaningful use." As most practices are aware, the government's stimulus bill will soon offer annual bonuses to practices who show "meaningful use" of EHRs -- and in 2015, practices who aren't showing meaningful use will face penalties. However, the government has not yet defined the term "meaningful use."

The answer will be revealed before 2010, Blumenthal noted. "The proposed rule should be available by the end of the year, after which there will be a 60-day comment period," he said during the call. CMS will react to those comments, and a final rule should be out early next year, subject to the federal rulemaking process. "There will be no definitive guidance for providers until the rulemaking is completed," Blumenthal advised.

If you are concerned about getting the meaningful use definition before the EHR bonus timeline begins, you are not alone. Many practices have expressed frustration at the confusion that surrounds the terminology.

Blumenthal noted that although he knows providers are eager to get a meaningful use definition, it's important to keep in mind that you have until 2015 before you'll face penalties if you don't meet the meaningful use definition.

"We are very much aware of this looming 2011 deadline in terms of becoming eligible for meaningful use payments," Blumenthal said. "I'd also point out that providers and hospitals can become eligible at any time between 2011 and 2015, when the penalties kick in. So even though the bonuses available diminish over time, the penalties can be avoided at any time over the next five years."

Focus on EHR Security

One caller suggested that security is the "Achilles heel" of the EHR system, but Blumenthal responded that HHS views EHR security as being a paramount concern. "Security is absolutely essential, it's foundational, and we are tasked by the law to develop new methods and to examine technology for ensuring security," he noted. "We are going to be asking our HIT policy committee to look directly at that subject in the very near future."

For more on the EHR program, visit <http://healthit.hhs.gov>.